

Living with the TD-12K

When Paul White reviewed the TD-12K for *Sound on Sound* magazine, he instantly knew he had to have a kit of his own for good. Here he explains why

As a long time TD-8 V-Drum owner, I recently decided to upgrade to the newer and more sophisticated TD-12, not least because it had a more realistic hi-hat and a larger snare pad. I reviewed a kit for *Sound On Sound* and, within a matter of minutes, decided that it just couldn't go back! Though I often use V-Drums for triggering other drum samples in the studio (FXpansion's BFD and Toontracks' DFH are personal favourites for rock and pop work), the modelling system employed by Roland is quite ingenious and allows the sounds to be fine-tuned in a way that would be impossible with samples. It also allows sounds to be created that vary in a more natural way with playing intensity or stick position across the head. And, in the case of the TD-12, you can get some quite realistic snare variations in much the same way as you would playing across the head on an acoustic drum.

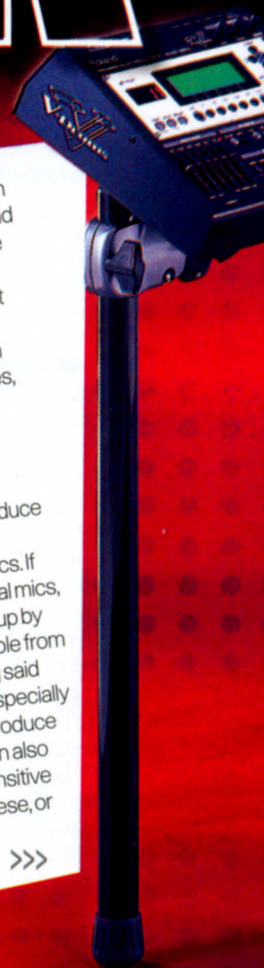
With a traditional acoustic drum, the energy imparted by the drumstick excites the head/shell combination, which is essentially a mechanical resonator. In a V-Drum, the stick impact is used to excite a computer modelled resonator, and the great thing about computer algorithms is that by changing numbers within the program, you can change the type and depth of drum shell being modelled.

The same thing applies to the head type and its tuning. In essence, this allows you to design your own drum kit and equip it with your choice of heads. You can even decide which type of damper to model. Clearly, this degree of control is a big advantage in the studio as even the best acoustic studio drum kit will suit some types of music more than others. As with the TD-8, some of the drum sounds are designed to be played with (nylon) brushes, where the response is surprisingly convincing.

Impressive cymbals

Where good acoustic cymbals are available, I often record in a hybrid manner, using the V-Drums to produce all the drum sounds and augmenting them with real cymbals and hi-hats picked up by two overhead mics. If you roll off some low end from the overhead cymbal mics, you reduce the amount of room coloration picked up by the microphones – the end result is indistinguishable from the real thing for most pop and rock music. Having said that, I'm really impressed by the TD-12 cymbals, especially the ride cymbal's ability to utilise three zones to produce more realistic bell, bow and edge sounds. You can also damp the cymbals by grabbing the pressure-sensitive edge. As a result, you can record happily with these, or mix both real and electronic cymbals.

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V-DRUMS TD-12K



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As with the earlier V-Drum kits, the TD-12 comes armed with additional sample-based sounds offering a variety of Latin and ethnic percussion, as well as some novel special effects, synth sounds and vocal effects. This is a big plus in the studio where you might not have access to clay pot drums, timbales and congas. There are also some neat sequencing options that allow the kick drum to trigger a walking bass line or the cymbals to play note sequences, but I have to admit that these never get used during recording sessions – though they are lots of fun live.

The reason I chose V-Drums originally was because drummers are often reluctant to record using electronic kits: they often say they don't feel right to play. At the time I got my first V-Drum kit, the tensioned mesh heads that take the place of the cheaper rubber pads used on most other electronic kits had the best feel of any electronic drums I'd tried. Though a few other manufacturers now produce kits with mesh heads, most visiting drummers who've used the V-Drums in my studio have been very happy with the feel. Another nice feature of the TD-12 is that the toms also incorporate rim sensors for triggering rim shots, or indeed any of the other sounds you care to assign to them.

Of course, mesh heads make very little sound, which is great news in any domestic environment. In the studio, however, it means the drums can be recorded in the same room as other instruments. Mesh heads are also impervious to loud sounds from other instruments, so there's none of the annoying snare rattle or tom ring you often get when trying to record a band playing together in the same space.

A natural progression

The new TD-12 hi-hat feels really good to play. It comprises a single cymbal unit that fits onto a conventional hi-hat stand and it moves and responds in the same way as the real thing when you operate the pedal. It also has two distinct sounds, depending on where and how you hit it. I don't quite know how the Roland engineers have done it, but as you 'close' the hi-hat and play, the sound changes in a very natural and progressive way.

There are also some algorithmic refinements which make consecutively played ride cymbal notes sound more natural. This is something I really appreciate, as this was a shortcoming of most early electronic drum kits and drum machines. The crash

and ride cymbals also seem to morph more naturally between timbres as you move across the surface of the cymbal.

The TD-12's larger 10-inch snare drum improves the playing experience, and for live use, the new stronger frame, with partially concealed wiring harness, reduces setting up time. The TD-12 also has a metal case where five physical faders work in conjunction with a function shift button to control the individual drum group and cymbal levels. As with the TD-8, the LCD window combines text and graphics to make patch editing more intuitive. One thing I am still getting to grips with, however, is the lack of save button: if you change something on a V-Drum brain, it stays changed. (Of course, you can restore some or all of the factory kits if you need to.) The brain is kitted out with 12 input jacks plus a hi-hat control jack, which means you have spare inputs to accommodate three more dual zone devices, such as toms or crash cymbals.

Drummers' brain power

I rarely use the TD-12's play-along practice tunes, but they are there if you need them and there are two direct line outputs as well as the main stereo mix. This is useful in the studio as you can separate key kit elements (such as kick and snare) for recording to allow for separate treatment when you come to mix. I feel this is important as you often need to add a little more reverb, EQ and compression to the snare, and although you can do that inside the brain (my guess is that Roland called it a brain because every drummer needs one!), it's often better to use more sophisticated studio hardware or plug-in processing if you're after the best sound. The same is true of the kick drum, which needs little or no reverb but invariably needs EQ and compression.

Alternatively, you can simply record the MIDI from the kit and then either send it back to the brain on playback or use it to trigger samples. Recording the MIDI has the clear advantage that mistakes can be 'massaged' using the sequencer's edit page.

The TD-12 boasts 50 kit memories, which come ready-filled with factory kits that can be overwritten or edited, and although more would have been nice (many of the factory patches are too good to wipe), there are probably enough to meet the practical needs of most users. Onboard effects can be used to process the kit sounds and, in addition to the obvious reverb (which comes

in several styles based on real environments, rather than the usual room hall and plate), there's compression and EQ and even the option to activate simulated snare rattle when you hit the toms. This may sound perverse but it actually adds to the realism of the sound in a subtle way.

Personally, I'm really pleased that Roland continues to invest time, effort and money in areas that other companies have left in search of easier markets. Electronic drums and guitar synths come immediately to mind – that's not to mention the V-Accordion, which is apparently doing exceptionally well.

The kit for the home studio

As I was writing this, the V-Drum kit range was undergoing another update – with more realistic hi-hats, even at the low end of the range.

While the more costly TD-20 is indisputably the top of the range, the TD-12 is based on the same drum instrument set (560 sounds) and has only slightly less editability. In fact, in my view the TD-12 is the kit to go for in the home studio as it offers most of what the TD-20 gives you for around half the cost. The TD-20 may be able to handle a few more pads and cymbals and has larger pads, but there's very little you can't do with the TD-12.

There will always be drummers who say that V-Drums still don't sound or play quite like a real acoustic kit, but my answer would be that they aren't supposed to. Most acoustic kits played in small rooms don't sound anything like a well-recorded drum kit heard on a record, so what Roland has done is given us the sound of a nicely produced studio quality kit as our source; no gaffa tape, no messing around with kick drum mic placement – just perfectly tuned, usable sounds. Admittedly, the dynamic range, though impressive, isn't quite as wide as that offered by a real kit. But a studio engineer will invariably use compressors to reduce the excessive dynamics of an acoustic kit to a more manageable level anyway – so why worry?

The built-in reverbs generally sound pretty good, despite their rather odd names ('Beach' anyone?), but in the studio you may find that a convolution reverb plug-in that gives you the sound of a live drum room is more convincing for some styles. I also sometimes find it useful to employ an enhancer plug-in of some type to add more definition to the drum sounds in a busy mix (Noveltech's Character plug-in for PowerCore is particularly good at lifting both real and electronic drums out of the mix). However, the amount of processing is generally much less than required for an acoustic kit.

There's also the relief of knowing that the drummer isn't going to knock the top off one of your expensive studio microphones. From an engineer's perspective, I really appreciate the luxury of not having to set up mics (other than cymbal mics if I use them) and not having to deal with spill between the drums – or, indeed, with annoying rattles and buzzes.

Real depth and energy

While on the subject, I got a Roland PM-10 powered drum monitor at the same time as my TD-12 for general practice and housebound jam sessions, and every time I switch it on, it still amazes me how much volume, punch and clarity this little box can generate. It's a simple enough thing, with one dual concentric 10-inch speaker powered by a 30-watt amplifier and just two bands of EQ, yet the sound it produces makes playing the V-Drums a very satisfying experience. In fact, a pair of them would probably be loud enough to play a small pub gig. Even the kick drum comes through with real depth and energy, and would make a great partner for one of the HandSonic models.

Considering the PM-10 is smaller than many guitar practice amps and that you can carry it with one hand, it's hard to resist. You can even use it for its intended application – as a personal monitor for the V-Drum kit at gigs where you're going through the main PA. In fact I think I may just need to buy another so I can practise in stereo! ■